

Minutes of the District 22 Medical Examiner Search Committee
4 p.m., May 31, 2022 – Meeting Room next to the State Attorney’s Office
Charlotte County Justice Center, 350 East Marion Avenue, Punta Gorda, Florida

Members Present

State Attorney Amira Fox, 20th Judicial Circuit
Dr. Barbara Wolf, Medical Examiner, Districts 5 & 24
The Honorable Kathy Smith, Public Defender, 20th Judicial Circuit
Sheriff Bill Prummell, Charlotte County Sheriff
Chief Pam Davis, Punta Gorda Police Department
Commissioner Chris Constance, Charlotte County Board of County Commissioners
The Honorable Ken Roberson, Roberson Funeral Homes
Dr. Joseph Ravid, Gulfview Medical Institute

Others Present

Chief Assistant State Attorney Richard Montecalvo
Assistant State Attorney Shannon Doolity, Charlotte County Office Head
Samantha Syoen, State Attorney’s Office Communications Director
Ray Maurillo, State Attorney’s Office I.T. Specialist
Chief Deputy Michael Casarella, Charlotte County Sheriff’s Office

Meeting

The first meeting of the District 22 Medical Examiner Search Committee was called to order by State Attorney Amira Fox, 20th Judicial Circuit. Members of the committee and those in attendance formally introduced themselves to the group. Committee member, Dr. Barbara Wolf, Medical Examiner, Districts 5 & 24, appeared via Zoom. There was a quorum.

State Attorney Fox explained the purpose of the meeting, went over the agenda, and explained the establishment of the committee was to find a qualified candidate to recommend to the Governor, to replace Dr. Imami, currently the District 22 Medical Examiner for Charlotte County, who is retiring.

Committee members were individually welcomed by State Attorney Fox and each member introduced themselves.

State Attorney Fox began a PowerPoint presentation. The presentation (included in a link above) detailed various elements of the District 22 Medical Examiner’s Office including coverage area, current staffing, the budget, and recent work load data reports.

Commissioner Chris Constance asked whether the Medical Examiner districts correlated to the circuits in the state. State Attorney Fox stated they do not directly correlate upon review of the coverage map.

Dr. Wolf explained that District 22 is understaffed as per the 2021 Annual Report Data that was shown in the presentation. State Attorney Fox then asked Dr. Wolf if the 141 autopsies in the data was a high

number for a single office. Dr. Wolf said they could easily be handled by one pathologist. State Attorney Fox referenced one of the challenges represented in the data are the deaths from Fentanyl increasing in Southwest Florida.

Public Defender Kathy Smith asked if the workload presented was out of line with similar sized districts and Dr. Wolf said it was not.

State Attorney Fox continued with the presentation and detailed the Medical Examiners Act in Florida Statute 406. In reference to expert witness fees, as detailed in the Statute, she explained that the expert witness fees are paid by the State Attorney's Office when the medical examiner is needed in a deposition or court.

State Attorney Fox discussed the current salary for the District 22 Medical Examiner which was \$395,704 from 2021 to 2022. It was noted by State Attorney Fox and Dr. Wolf, that it is a very competitive salary.

Public Defender Kathy Smith asked if we have comparable salaries to similar size counties and Dr. Wolf explained that Dr. Imami is a private contractor and some other Medical Examiner Offices are county employees. Dr. Wolf said figures are comparable for private offices.

Commissioner Chris Constance questioned how the total budget for the office of \$723,000 is utilized. Ken Roberson suggested that the committee may have to consider a restructure by reviewing current procedures such as using locum tenens versus paying a staffed assistant. He suggested looking at other county budgets to see if the Charlotte County budget for the Medical Examiner's Office is dated.

State Attorney Fox then began the second half of the PowerPoint presentation detailing the role of the search committee. She explained open meetings and the importance of public meetings. She agreed with Commissioner Constance that there should be no emails, no texts, and no phone calls about agenda.

State Attorney Fox said the County Attorney has noticed this meeting and will announce the future meetings. She also said the State Attorney's Office website has a section called "Public Notice" that will include all material from the meetings.

Commissioner Constance suggested that an agenda could be posted prior to the meeting.

State Attorney Fox went over the responsibilities of the search committee and explained the committee would have to do background checks and the committee could reach out to connections on candidates. She also stated the process of background checks would start at the State Attorney's Office. She also said there would have to be an interview committee as well as advertisements created to find people who may be interested in the job.

State Attorney Fox gave out copies of a letter from Dr. Russell S. Vega, Chief Medical Examiner District Twelve of Florida, who is interested in the open position in District 22. Dr. Wolf detailed many positive attributes of Dr. Vega and his work.

Ken Roberson asked to go back to the budget and questioned if now was the time to look at private or public offices. Dr. Wolf discussed differences between county versus privately run Medical Examiner

Offices and gave an example that she owns the vehicles in her private office which is a big burden off the county.

Dr. Wolf wanted to give perspective on how things are nationally and said there are about half the number of pathologists needed in the field. She referenced the pandemic, fewer people going into the profession, and people retiring as explanation for the shortage. She called the current situation a "buyer's market."

Dr. Vega's interest in combining two districts was discussed. Dr. Imami uses a private toxicology lab according to Dr. Wolf, AXIS, which has a quick turn-around time but Dr. Vega uses the University of Gainesville and toxicology turn-around is very slow. Dr. Wolf said that is a drawback. She cited it as the reason his office has not received accreditation. Dr. Wolf suggested it should be a goal of this committee that the Medical Examiner's Office be accredited. State Attorney Fox said slow toxicology reports impact criminal cases.

State Attorney Fox continued to review the PowerPoint outlining the responsibility of the committee and showing a timeline flow chart of the committee's responsibilities.

Commissioner Constance suggested an application form be created for candidates, with specific questions, that all committee members reference. He also suggested having legacy planning so the person hired could decide on their successor.

Ken Roberson told the committee Dr. Vega has a cremation fee at \$35 per case in Sarasota County, while Charlotte County does not charge a fee. He would not like to see a cremation fee approval for Charlotte County.

Dr. Wolf suggested Dr. Vega be asked for a more specific proposal and be invited to a meeting for discussion.

Commissioner Constance asked if there is a standard application or advertisement that can be offered. Dr. Wolf said she has one that she has adapted from other districts and State Attorney Fox referenced an example for an Associate Medical Examiner in Charlotte County.

Ken Roberson questioned whether Charlotte County should have their own Medical Examiner's Office and not be combined with another district.

Public Defender Kathy Smith and Sheriff Prummell suggested seeking other applicants as long as the committee is not bound to then interview the candidates and suggested an attorney would need to answer that question. Dr. Wolf said she had contact information for an attorney with the Medical Examiner's Commission named James Martin, that she would provide to the committee.

State Attorney Fox suggested she write a letter to Dr. Vega asking for a five-year budget proposal for the District 22 Medical Examiner's Office, also requesting to meet and discuss the plan with him at a future meeting.

Commissioner Constance made a motion to approve those next steps. Charlotte County Sheriff Bill Prummell seconded the motion. It was unanimously approved by the committee.

Commissioner Constance suggested meeting with Dr. Vega but keeping it open for a final interview at a later time and the committee agreed.

The next meeting date for the District 22 Medical Examiner Search Committee was set for July 5th at 4 PM at the same location which is the meeting room on the first floor of the Charlotte County Justice Center. State Attorney Fox said the meeting would be noticed online. There was no further discussion.

No public was in attendance so there was no public discussion. The meeting was adjourned.